

Olympics postponement may be a cultural opportunity for Tokyo

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The Olympic flame on display in Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture in late March. Kimimasa Mayama/EPA

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When a terrorist attack during the Munich 1972 Olympics killed 11 members of the Israeli team, the president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Avery Brundage, famously said: “The games must go on”. The Salt Lake City 2002 games also went on, just months after the 9/11 attacks on New York.

In 2020, however, the IOC and the Tokyo 2020 organisers conceded to mounting international pressure as the coronavirus pandemic continued to spread, and postponed the games until July 2021.

This is only the fourth time in 124 years that the summer Olympics have not been delivered as planned. The impact of the postponement on world sport will be immense. Yet, beyond the impact on athletes and investors, the postponement also has a major impact on Tokyo city and everything it expected to gain by hosting the Olympics.

This is the second time Tokyo has been forced to change its games preparations, after it cancelled the 1940 Olympics due to the second world war. When Tokyo did eventually host its first games in 1964, it

used them as a soft power platform to project a future-facing city and a post-war Japan that was about to become a world leader in industry and technology.

Big plans for 2020

In 2020, Tokyo had bold aspirations to tell the world new stories about contemporary Japan. It also wanted to showcase different perspectives on Japanese heritage, presenting the games as “the most innovative in history”. The 2020 games were seen as a chance for Japan to project itself as a major international cultural and creative centre, with the capacity to shape trends worldwide.

The official Tokyo 2020 cultural programme – the Cultural Olympiad – was launched straight after the Rio 2016 games and had grown into an ambitious nationwide programme by 2020. Its first three years focused on a national agenda, prioritising the promotion and rediscovery of traditional Japanese culture within Japan itself and a special focus on enticing the young into classic and new forms of Japanese heritage.

From April 2020, the aim was to shift into an international gear. The Nippon Festival was to be Tokyo 2020’s flagship cultural event, scheduled to last until the end of the Paralympic Games in September.

Nippon Festival Edit0228 FIN



Key cornerstones of the festival included a plan to showcase Japanese heritage in a new light, via initiatives such as a Kabuki x Opera, a world premiere aimed at exploring the links between ancient kabuki theatre traditions and Western opera. The festival also planned to celebrate the cultural and economic potential of the Tohoku region which was seriously damaged after the 2011 earthquake. There was also an international children’s programme planned for July called Wassai, and plans to explore new forms of inclusion, such as the ONE festival showcasing the creative work of disabled and LGTB communities.

As of early April 2020, only the Kabuki x Opera event had been officially cancelled, but the remaining Nippon Festival headline acts have become effectively impossible to deliver as Japan enters a state of

emergency.

An opportunity to showcase culture

It remains to be seen whether the complexity of postponing the Olympic sport competitions by a year will push the often underfunded and under-promoted Olympic culture and arts agenda back into the shadows. There may be few resources left to reenact all the major Olympic art events at their original scale in 2021. However, by March 2020, much of the cultural programming had already been delivered and new forms of collaboration secured. There are many stories worth telling about the first three years of Japan's Cultural Olympiad without the need to wait until 2021 – from the government-led **Beyond2020** national legacy programme, to the capital's own TokyoTokyo festival.

Far from having a negative impact on Tokyo and Japan's cultural repositioning plans, the postponement of the games gives organisers an opportunity to show they care. They can show they are in tune with the global health crisis and contribute towards positive and inspirational global messaging by tapping into the wealth of creativity, community empowerment and rich heritage present within their Cultural Olympiad programme.

The postponement of the games therefore offers an opportunity to refocus the public's attention on the symbolic dimension of the Olympics. After all, the games are supposed to be a festival, designed to showcase human excellence and bring the world together in peaceful community rituals. The absence of the games in 2020 offers an additional year for organisers and artists to explore these aspirations and express them in innovative ways.

Where previous host cities, most recently Rio in 2016, failed to make a splash with their cultural programmes, what the world needs most right now as it battles coronavirus are stories of societal strength and cultural cooperation.

In the absence of Tokyo 2020 as a gathering for world sport and medal rankings, this may be the chance for Japan's creative industries to raise their game. Ahead of the sporting competitions in 2021, games organisers should make the most of the artists and creators they've worked with since 2016 to show how innovative they can be, and to tell us loud and clear why hosting the Olympics, particularly in the aftermath of a virus pandemic, still matters to Japan and the world.



Olympics

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